

“Free to Be”
Galatians 5:13-26
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
July 7, 2024
Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

My parents’ home is on the edge of our small town in mid-Michigan, and they have almost two acres of land. When I was a kid, my dad planted an orchard, with apples, peaches, pears, and of course, cherries. By the time I was in middle school, the trees were producing fruit regularly...not a bumper crop by any means, but enough to share with family and be proud of. The literal fruits of my dad’s labor were beautiful and delicious.

But after a while, tending the orchard began to be too much work. The deer enjoyed chomping on the trees, peeling off bark and pulling fledgling fruit off before ripening. The deer were relentless, and my dad just couldn’t keep up with them. So, the trees were allowed to grow as they would, the pears tall and straight, the apples bent and gnarled, the peaches graceful and winding, the cherries exploding new branches wildly.

Whenever I read our scripture text from Galatians about the fruit of the Spirit, I think of the trees in our backyard in Michigan. I think of how careful, patient tending yielded tasty rewards; how it took work to steward the trees; how the forces of nature were challenging to keep up with; how the trees, left to their own devices, would grow in marvelously diverse ways...but the fruit production decreased.

The fruit of the Spirit—not the fruitS (plural) of the Spirit, as often depicted in children’s faith formation curriculum with cute peaches and plums and grapes with “kindness,” “patience,” “self-control,” written on them. The fruit of the Spirit that the apostle Paul writes about in his letter to the Galatians, is singular.¹ The fruit of the Spirit is the whole list of qualities that Paul names: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. All these proceed from the tree of faith, the root of which is the phrase which Jesus says can sum up all the law and prophets: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Basically, you can tell what people believe by how they are in the world, by their words and actions. When we love our neighbors as we love ourselves, we yield the fruit...we show the evidence of love by practicing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Of course, this list of desirable qualities is not exhaustive. We might add compassion, mercy, creativity, wisdom, or many other words that illustrate our desire to be good and do good in this world. Luckily, our scripture passage also reminds us that all of these qualities are to be put into practice within a framework of living characterized by freedom.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-13-3/commentary-on-galatians-51-13-25-2>

“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become enslaved to one another.” The language of verse 13 in the New Revised Standard Version is jarring—and we ought to be very careful about language that uses the illustration of slavery. Commentators on this text are split about the appropriateness of this word in the phrase, with some saying that a more accurate translation to our modern context would be to think about it as “devoted service.” Others say that Paul is being rhetorically clever here, trying to repurpose the word in a spiritual sense over and against the sociopolitical sense. The point, one commentator says, is to illustrate the drama of freedom in Christ and the importance of using our freedom to love one another absolutely. In our USAmerican context, any references to slavery bring up the vast and despicable history of chattel slavery, and the generational implications still felt widely today. It is my hope that using a translation with these words can be helpful, in reminding us to continually confront the harsh truths of the past and their resonances into the present. No matter what, we must tread carefully.

Though it is not my favorite version of the Bible, the Message Bible by Eugene Peterson has Galatians 5:13 in what I find to be a more helpful translation: "It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don't use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows."

Freedom is the context for our life. We are free to choose how we are in this world. And we are not to use our freedom as an excuse for bad behavior, but to participate in each other's mutual flourishing. Paul's hope for the people of Galatia, passed on to us through the reception of scripture over time, is that freedom would be exercised by loving our neighbors as ourselves, producing fruit of the Spirit that would influence this world positively.

We are free to choose to care for our fruit trees, to tend them diligently so that they will produce food to consume, or to let them grow wild and unkempt, sacrificing productivity and transgressing boundaries. Freedom is a big deal for Baptists.

At the risk of being too didactic, particularly for those among you who are lifelong Baptists, here's a little background about Baptists in North America, and how a central care for freedom became what we know of as our Baptist distinctives today.

North American Baptists are descended from English Baptists. Early Baptists were routinely targeted for practicing Separatism in England, where the one church was the Church of England, with the monarch as the head of the church. Baptists were jailed, tortured, and put to death for their Separatist beliefs. One of these was Thomas Helwys, who opposed the established religion of the Church of England, and ultimately was imprisoned until his death for promoting liberty of conscience. In the later 1600s, English immigrants to North America brought with them their fledgling Baptist beliefs. Roger Williams was thrown out of the Massachusetts colony because he disagreed with the Church of England, which was established as part of the colonial government. He did not want any ruler, royal or otherwise, to dictate how people practiced their faith. Roger Williams went on to found Rhode Island, where religious freedom was guaranteed. Over the course of the 1700s as anti-colonial sentiment built up and independence from England came

into view, more and more people sought refuge in the North American English colonies due to a higher potential for religious freedom.

Our Baptist ancestor John Leland wrote, “Government should protect every man in thinking and speaking freely, and see that one does not abuse another. The liberty that I contend for, is more than toleration. The very idea of toleration is despicable; it supposes that some have a pre-eminence above the rest, to grant indulgence; whereas all should be equally free, Jews, Turks, Pagans and Christians.”²

The four Baptist distinctives, as my friend and colleague Jonathan Malone wrote in his book on Baptist polity and theology, arose from observation of life in community, not from values handed down from the academy or higher-ups in denominations. As people practiced their Christian faith together, with a high value for freedom, four themes of practical theology emerged...freedom of association, freedom of interpretation, freedom of conscience, freedom of religion. We also think of these as church freedom, Bible freedom, soul freedom, religious freedom. And with all freedoms also comes responsibility, reminiscent of Paul’s guidance in Galatians 5: don’t use freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want but serve each other.

Freedom of association means that Baptist churches at the local level have a choice of how they want to affiliate with other Baptist churches. Individual churches get to discern for themselves how they feel called to follow the way of Jesus, not being beholden to the whims of hierarchy. That is, in the history of Seattle First Baptist, how we got to be part of the Evergreen region, a region that is welcoming of our liberal stances, particularly on LGBTQIA+ inclusion and affirmation.

Freedom of interpretation means that each person has the right to interpret sacred texts for themselves—and a responsibility to do so within the context of a community that can discern wisdom and share knowledge together in accordance with their values. One example of how we practice this together is in our Thursday Bible studies, where we share openly what the Holy is saying to us through the text, confront our questions and explore opportunities for learning, and then are challenged to discern together what the Holy would have our community hear.

Freedom of conscience, or soul freedom, means that everyone has the opportunity to relate to God without need for any intermediary or intercessor. Individuals may act according to their conscience, free from creeds imposed by others. This particular value paved the way for many Baptists throughout history to be known as “dissenters,” following their freedom of conscience to oppose threats to liberty and justice. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr was one example of living this Baptist value to its full extent.

Freedom of religion is the belief that no government can tell people to practice a certain faith or believe a certain way. Each person has the freedom to practice the religion of their choice—or not to practice any religion! Some Baptist lore says that early Baptists in colonial America were instrumental in making sure religious freedom for all was enshrined into the fabric of this country, even directly influencing the First Amendment to the Constitution, which contains the

² The Virginia Chronicle (1790)

anti-establishment clause. We must recognize that freedom of religion for all people is under dire threat across this country right now. Infringing on religious freedom is a central theme of Project 2025, the dangerous brainchild of the far-right. I am grateful for organizations like the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, with whom Pastor Leigh will be doing a fellowship this summer, because they are active at the state and federal level in legally opposing policies that endanger religious liberty for all—not just for some.

Now, it also must be said that while these freedoms are beautiful and important ideas, they have not always been applied to all people, and still are not today. Indigenous peoples, enslaved persons, Jewish and Muslim people, and more have been denied freedom of religion, sometimes by legislatively sanctioned acts, and sometimes by discrimination and violence by their neighbors.

And these freedoms are not even equally applied within the Baptist family! There are many examples, the recent Southern Baptist Convention among them, of some churches being disfellowshipped because of what boils down to their practice of soul freedom, Bible freedom, church freedom and religious freedom!

The Baptist freedoms, like any freedom, can be applied in fruitful and just ways...and can be misappropriated, resulting in exclusion, exploitative community, and a narrow vision of God and humanity.

But these four freedoms are also why I am proud to be Baptist, and to practice my Christian faith as a Baptist. These freedoms, while not enacted perfectly, seem directly related to Paul's words in Galatians 5: "For freedom, Christ set us free." (5:1) We are free to choose how we live and worship, and hopefully, the framework undergirding all our living and worshipping is the way of Love. By living with Love at the center, enabled by freedom, we have the opportunity to produce the fruit of the Spirit.

We are free to be who we are, wholly ourselves. We are free to worship or not worship as we discern is right for us. We are free to steward our own relationship with the Divine, and it doesn't have to be just like anyone else's relationship. We are free from a scarcity mindset, and free to choose to live with a mindset of abundance. We are free to love ourselves, love each other, love our neighbors, love the world with compassion, generosity, mercy, and justice. We are free to oppose the powers that would define liberty only for those who ascribe to white Christian nationalism, which currently poses the greatest threat to democracy and faith in this country. We are free to use our power, grounded in Love, to make others free. We are free to follow the Way of Jesus, a way of radical hospitality and expansive inclusion and speaking truth-to-power and aspiring to the world that is surely possible. We are free to make the kin-dom of God become known among us.

Beloveds, ground yourselves in the Love of the Holy. Grab on to your freedom and use it wisely to create more liberty wherever you go. Steward and care for yourself and others so that the fruit of the Spirit will come to blossom among you. Love your neighbor as yourself, which means loving yourself, and do so abundantly and without fear. May it be so. Amen.